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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 001193

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE SAD STATE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN OSIJEK

CLASSIFIED BY: POLOFF MITCH BENEDICT FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (U) ON A RECENT VISIT TO OSIJEK WE STOPPED IN AT THE OFFICES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. DOWN FROM A PRE-WORLD WAR II POPULATION OF OVER 10,000, THERE ARE NOW ONLY 150 JEWS IN THE REGION, AND BY STRICT DEFINITION MOST OF THOSE WOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED JEWISH. ELDERLY, POOR IN HEALTH AND RICHES, THE COMMUNITY FACES AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE. HOWEVER, RESTITUTION OF PROPERTY COULD SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE THEIR FINANCIAL STATUS. END SUMMARY.

THE JEWS OF EASTERN SLAVONIA

2. (U) THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF OSIJEK (JCO) IS THE REPRESENTATIVE ORGANIZATION FOR ALL JEWS OF EASTERN SLAVONIA. PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II, THIS REGION CONTAINED ABOUT 10,000 JEWS THAT WERE DIVIDED INTO SEVERAL COMMUNITIES. JEWS BEGAN TO LEAVE JUST PRIOR TO THE WAR; THOSE WHO REMAINED WERE DECIMATED BY THE HOLOCAUST. FURTHER EMIGRATION OCCURRED IN 1948-1952, WHEN THE CONSOLIDATION OF COMMUNISM AT HOME COINCIDED WITH THE BIRTH OF ISRAEL.

3. (U) TODAY THERE ARE BARELY 150 JEWS IN THE WHOLE REGION. DARKO FISHER, HEAD OF THE JCO, SAID THAT OUTSIDE OSIJEK AND VUKOVAR THERE ARE ONLY SINGLE FAMILIES IN SOME OF THE LARGER TOWNS. HOWEVER, BY STRICT CRITERIA MOST OF MEMBERS OF THE JCO COULD NOT BE COUNTED AS JEWS. FISHER SAID AS LONG AS ONE GRANDPARENT WAS JEWISH, AND THE INDIVIDUAL HOLDS NO OTHER RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, THEY ARE WELCOME AS MEMBERS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY.

4. (U) THERE ARE LESS THAN 10 YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY, AND ALL OF THEM COME FROM MIXED MARRIAGES. FISHER TOLD US THAT, GIVEN THE RESTRICTIONS PLACED ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY AT TIMES OF PRACTICING AND MAINTAINING RITUALS AND TRADITIONS, NO JEW BORN IN THE AREA EVEN PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II KNOWS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN OBSERVANT JEW. THE PRIMARY CONCERNS OF THE JCO ARE FOR THE HEALTH AND WELFARE OF ITS MOSTLY ELDERLY, IMPOVERISHED AND ILL MEMBERS.

PROPERTY RESTITUTION

5. (C) THE JCO SUBMITTED A LIST OF 14 CONFISCATED OR NATIONALIZED PROPERTIES FOR WHICH THEY CLAIM RESTITUTION PRIOR TO THE DEADLINE OF JUNE 30, 1997. TO DATE NOTHING HAS BEEN RESTITUTED. FISHER WAS MORE THAN WILLING TO SHARE THE BLAME FOR LACK OF PROGRESS, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND HE SAID HE HAD NO DOUBT THERE WAS "SOME BLOCKAGE" ON THE PART OF THE GOVERNMENT. RETURN OR COMPENSATION FOR EVEN A FEW PROPERTIES WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY ALTER THE FINANCIAL STATUS OF THE COMMUNITY.

6. (SBU) INCLUDED AMONG THE PROPERTIES IS THE SITE OF FORMER OSIJEK SYNAGOGUE ON THE MAIN STREET IN THE CENTER OF OSIJEK. THE SYNAGOGUE WAS BURNED DOWN IN 1941, AND THE REMAINS WERE CLEARED IN 1952. AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, THE JCO WAS GIVEN AN ALTERNATIVE PROPERTY AS A FORM OF COMPENSATION, BUT THAT TOO WAS CONFISCATED IN 1955. A MIXED COMMERCIAL/RESIDENTIAL BUILDING OCCUPIES THE SITE OF THE SYNAGOGUE TODAY. THE THIRTEEN REMAINING PROPERTIES CONSIST OF BUILDINGS AND RESIDENCES -- THE RABBI'S HOUSE, A SCHOOL, OTHER PROPERTY RELATED TO THE SYNAGOGUE -- EITHER PURCHASED BY THE JCO OR WILLED TO THE JCO BY MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY.

7. (C) FISHER SAID THE COURTS DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO, AND CONSEQUENTLY DO NOTHING. SINCE 1997 THEY HAVE RECEIVED ONLY ONE COURT DECISION ASKING FOR FURTHER DOCUMENTATION TO PROVE OWNERSHIP. HOWEVER, HE ASKED RHETORICALLY, IS THERE EVER GOING TO BE A DOCUMENT THAT PROVES THE PROPERTY WAS CONFISCATED BY THE NAZI REGIME?
ROSSIN

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